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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: FEMALE PRAYER LEADER, ACTIVE EMBASSY GRIST  
FOR CHATROOM MILL

1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat rooms "Al-Sablah" and "Al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Dr. Amina Wadud to lead prayer before mixed congregants in NY  
-- An active Embassy draws comment

End summary.

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Is Oman Ready For A Female Prayer Leader?  
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2. Recent postings in "Al-Sablah" carried mixed reactions about news purporting that an American Muslim Scholar, Dr. Amina Wadud, intends to lead prayers on Friday, March 18th, 2005 in New York. The article, which appeared in regional press over the weekend, was cut and pasted from the privately owned Omani newspaper "al-Watan" into Al-Sablah. Responses were generally negative. One Sablah member wrote, "I implore all wise men not to join this prayer." Another more positive member suggested, "The idea of a woman prayer leader may invite more crowds of worshippers to join, which is a good thing." Another Sablah member offered a strong argument in support of Dr. Wadud as a prayer leader by offering an alternative interpretation of the role of women found in the Quran. The conversation closed on a sarcastic note when one member stated, "If Dr. Wadud is so great, then she should step forward and ask to lead the prayers in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque."

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We Must Be Doing Something Right  
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3. Al-Sablah recently carried the text of an article published in the UAE newspaper "al-Khaleej". The article was entitled "Ministry of Justice organizes an English language course for Judges." The article referred to a "legal English" language course offered to Omani judges, taught by an American instructor, and which is supported by the U.S. Embassy in Muscat. Many Sablah members reacted strongly against this article. One Sablah writer wrote, "I wonder if this the beginning of western interference in Oman, or is this just part of the overwhelming western presence in the region. Either way, it is indeed interference, which in Oman is overlooked by some and accepted by others who wish to benefit from the west."

4. Another Sablah member commented that, "The American Embassy presides over our celebrations. The American Embassy organizes seminars for teachers and selects the participants according to criteria that are not made public knowledge. Nor do we know the purpose of these courses." This same respondent later commented, "The U.S. Ambassador is seen all over Oman in our newspapers, attending seminars and workshops, participating in English language courses in several schools, acting as if he presides over everything. The behavior of this Embassy and the U.S. Ambassador's presence at all these events is unlike all other diplomatic Missions, even those of Arab countries with diplomatic missions here." Still other members suggested, "This is shameless interference in our affairs to which many Omanis have applauded, either because of ignorance, negligence, or indifference. Since when have Embassies turned into schools that teach languages?"

5. Finally, on a more positive note, one Sablah member who has participated in past Embassy programming commented, "I personally benefited from the initiatives of the Embassy or 'the West', particularly in the field of law. As a result of my participation in one of their exchange programs, I am not as quick to condemn the Embassy's outreach initiatives as some here." The same participant concluded by challenging al-Sablah members saying, "If you really want to know what the Embassy is doing in our community, and why you keep seeing their Ambassador in our news, contact them, and ask questions! Stop criticizing automatically, especially when you see them doing positive things that our government isn't even doing!"

